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Celeste Huttes

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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In Tune with History

As the nation commemorates the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, IWU alumni help bring the era's music to life.

Story by CELESTE HUTTES Photos by MICHAEL VAUGHN



The sounds of the Civil War filled the sunlit battlefield as band members solemnly raised their brass instruments to play a stirring patriotic melody — a prelude to the thunder of cannon blasts and gunfire and the moans of fallen soldiers. At the annual “Shadows of the Blue and Gray” Civil War re-enactment this past October in Princeton, Ill., members of the 33rd Illinois Volunteer Regiment Band once again played music that seemed to turn back time.

“Our mission is ‘history through music,’” says Mark Lareau ’93, who plays Eb (E flat) cornet in the band and served as president of the 33rd board. “We want to give people a taste of what Civil War soldiers actually heard.”

(Above) From left, Bob Jackson ’76, Sara Simpson ’70 and Mark Lareau ’93 are among the alumni members of the band.

For the past 15 years, the 33rd Band — a non-profit group that includes several Wesleyan alumni — has performed its vintage style of music for historic re-enactments, civic and school events and dedication ceremonies. In 2005, it was one of four route-bands chosen to perform at the 55th Presidential Inaugural Parade in Washington, D.C. The band has played twice at IWU, once for the University’s sesquicentennial in 2000 and again in 2007.

Last summer, an East Coast tour included concerts at the Antietam National Battlefield and the Gettysburg National Military Park. In July, the band will play at the 150th anniversary of the First Battle of Bull Run in Manassas, Va., the first major land battle of the American Civil War. The event is expected to draw thousands.

Every performance is a tribute to the soldiers and musicians who engaged in America's bloodiest conflict.

The Civil War was four months old when 17 men from central Illinois — farmers, students and craftsmen among them — came together to serve the Union by making music. The original 33rd Illinois Volunteer Regiment Band first assembled in August 1861 at State Normal University (later to become Illinois State University). Led by C.S. Elder and Augustus Woodward, both of Lexington, Ill., this musical band of brothers proudly served the 33rd Regiment, a unit of McLean County volunteers, as it fought throughout the Mississippi Valley and distinguished itself at Vicksburg. The band's music entertained and comforted the soldiers, led them into battle and often accompanied them to their death.



Regiment Band members pose for a group photo.

The 33rd Band was reborn in 1995. That year, Gary Borling — a Vietnam veteran with a passion for antique brass instruments — recruited area musicians to perform for a Lincoln–Douglas debate re-enactment at Bloomington's historic David Davis Mansion.

Mastering Civil War-era instruments for the re-enactment was no easy task, according to Sara Simpson '70, who plays both Eb alto horn and cymbals for the band.

A music major while at IWU, Simpson is a retired music teacher and a seasoned performer who holds a master's degree in clarinet performance from Northwestern University. Still, it took her about a month to learn to play the 1875 Albert System clarinet loaned to her from the collection of Minor Myers, jr., then president of Illinois Wesleyan. "It had fewer keys and their placement is different than modern-day clarinets," she explains.

In the end, Simpson and her fellow musicians "had so much fun that we begged Gary to let us keep doing this!" Adopting the 33rd Regiment identity, the band was managed by Borling until he lost his battle with cancer in 2000. Today the bandmaster is Kirby Reese, who taught music part-time at IWU prior to becoming a music teacher for McLean County Unit District 5 Schools.

Just like the original 33rd, members of the re-enactment band come from a variety of backgrounds. Lareau, who was a biology and nursing major at IWU, is a manager for emergency trauma services at BroMenn Healthcare in Normal. A trumpet player since the fifth grade, he has performed with the band since its second season.

Another of the band's early members is C. Roland "Rollie" Hill '51, a retired businessman who majored in speech at Illinois Wesleyan. A self-taught musician, Hill currently plays Db piccolo

with the band after switching from Simple System clarinet. What the 33rd performers have in common, Hill says, is a desire to give audiences an experience that is true to history.



The 33rd Regiment Band prides itself on historical accuracy in every detail.

antique alto horn he has played for the band since 2006 to be an especially challenging instrument. “It’s a weird animal,” says Jackson, who majored in music at IWU and is now retired from State Farm. “It’s offbeat and hard to play in tune.”

Authenticity also carries over to the band’s wardrobe, from the leather-brimmed, kepi-style caps on their heads to their ankle-high boots — and, of course, the woolen blue jackets with brass buttons.

Pointing to the boxy square toes on her black brogan boots, Simpson explains, “They don’t have a left or right foot. That made it easier to get dressed in a hurry.”

Historical accuracy isn’t always comfortable. “I learned that it’s not a very good idea to wear a heavy wool uniform on a 97-degree day. But I do it anyway,” Hill says cheerfully.

Accompanying Hill on those hot days is his wife, Marie Ann (Schlemmer) Hill ’52, who attends nearly all of the 33rd activities adorned in period dress.

“I am a ‘groupie’ and follow the band wherever it goes,” says Marie Ann, who majored in drama at Illinois Wesleyan. “Dressing in period costumes helps create an atmosphere and adds to the history.”

Assuming the role of a Civil War lady is also “just plain fun.” A Sunday school teacher for the past 20 years, Marie Ann has found that children are particularly interested in the hoop skirts she wears. “Sometimes I’ll very discreetly show them my pantaloons,” she adds with a laugh.

“We want to recreate sounds as close to the original as possible,” says Hill. “Authenticity adds to the color and flavor of the experience — it takes you back in time.”

This drive for authenticity is reflected in the band’s restored Civil War-era instruments, many of which were used during actual battle and dress parades in 1861. Only the drums are replicas because the originals are too fragile to play.

Simpson’s Eb alto horn, made around 1857, was found “flat as a pancake” in a garage and miraculously brought back to life by Carl’s Pro Band of Bloomington. Bob Jackson ’76 finds the

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Performing for a re-enactment, particularly on an actual Civil War battlefield, can be powerful, even surreal. “It pulls you away from modern reality,” says Lareau.

Rollie Hill recalls a re-enactment of the 1861 speech given by Abraham Lincoln at the old Springfield, Ill., train depot before departing for Washington, D.C., to begin his presidency of a nation on the brink of civil war.

“As soldiers escorted ‘Lincoln’ through the audience, cheers spontaneously went up through the crowd,” Hill says. “Chills went up and down my spine. It was so authentic, so real — just like we were right there.”

Another vivid brush with history came in 2006 at the Vicksburg National Military Park in Mississippi. The band performed for the rededication of the Illinois Monument honoring more than 36,000 Illinois soldiers who fought in the Vicksburg Campaign. That campaign proved especially costly to the 33rd Illinois regiment: 11 of its 32 soldiers died, and all but one were injured in the battle.

Simpson recalls turning a number of heads “as we walked around in our Union uniforms in the heart of the South.”

In fact, the 33rd plays tunes popular with soldiers on both sides of the war, including favorites of Confederate Army General Robert E. Lee as well as his Union counterpart, Ulysses S. Grant. Of the two, “General Grant did not enjoy or appreciate band music as much as General Lee did,” says Simpson. Indeed, Lee is known to have said, “I do not believe we could have an army without music.”



“Bands were the cheerleaders of the day; they helped keep spirits up,” says Hill.

(Above) Alumni members of the 33rd include (front row, from left): Mark Lareau and Sara Simpson; back row: Marie Ann Hill, C. Roland Hill and Bob Jackson.

Civil War musicians’ talents “ranged from the sublime to the dismal, but everybody loved their bands,” says band narrator and percussionist Carl Bennett, who shares little-known stories of the era’s music at many performances. (His wife, Sue Stroyan-Bennett, is information services librarian and a professor at IWU’s Ames Library.)

The “hits of the ’60s” (i.e., 1860s) included favorites like “Goober Peas,” “Hoist Up the Flag,” “Turkey in the Straw” and “Battle Cry of Freedom.”

“They played a lot of upbeat, marching-type tunes, as well as hymns and dance music, to try to keep the soldiers’ spirits up and performed songs they were familiar with,” says Lareau, whose young sons prefer their father’s music to the radio, and love to sing along to “Goober Peas.”

“I have learned a lot about how music affected people during the 1800s,” says Simpson. “It is amazing what significance a certain ballad can have on a person and the stories associated with the various songs.”

Simpson gives the example of “Lorena,” a mournful ballad of lost love that was popular with Civil War soldiers on both sides of the conflict. “During the war, it made soldiers think of their wives at home, and they started deserting,” she says. This prompted some commanders to ban the song. However, clever musicians rearranged the tune into a lively quickstep march and its popularity continued.

“I think music played a bigger part of everyone’s life back then,” says Lareau. “They didn’t have TVs or Xboxes. Music was something they could take with them from home.”

The diary of one Civil War soldier speaks to the motivational power of music: “The quick step has enough music in it to make a man who was just about dead brace up, throw out his chest and take a step as if he had received a new lease on life.”

In tribute to such soldiers and the music that inspired and comforted them during a time of national strife, the 33rd Illinois Volunteer Regiment Band will keep on marching to the beat of the past.

To visit the 33rd Regiment Band's website, [click here.](#)